

## Acceptance

Acceptance was very important for Rodney, who visited his elderly father each weekend. Rodney's father had dementia and no longer recognized that Rodney was his son. Each week when he visited, his father would ask, "Who are you? Do I know you?" At first, Rodney would explain, "I'm your son. Don't you recognize me?" His father would become very agitated and upset when Rodney said this. Sometimes his father would cry and say, "I don't know you," or "You are not my son!" It was very sad and painful for Rodney to realize that his father no longer knew who he was. His pain and sadness could have easily filled all his remaining time with his father.

A nurse at the care home helped Rodney develop acceptance. She told him, "Your father does not know who you are. If you understand this and let him experience you as a nice man who comes to visit him, then maybe you can still enjoy his company at times." Rodney considered this and decided to try to accept this new reality in his relationship with his father. When his father asked, "Who are you? Do I know you?" Rodney would reply, "My name is Rodney. I like to come here and talk to people."

Acceptance of thoughts and moods is sometimes a worthwhile alternative to identifying, evaluating, and changing thoughts. Acceptance involves observing your thoughts, moods, and physical reactions without making judgments about them. For example, many people find it helpful to be able simply to observe their thoughts as they appear and as they disappear. Acceptance of your thoughts should not be confused with believing that your thoughts are accurate or adaptive. Acceptance simply means that you recognize these thoughts are present, and that you can observe them without adding any meaning or judgment about them. For example, Sal understood that an important step in learning to manage anxiety was entering situations that made him anxious, in order to test his fears and practice coping. At first, when he felt anxious in these situations, he negatively judged himself: "What's wrong with me? I'm so weak. I want this anxiety to go away." In fact, such thoughts led to an increase in Sal's anxiety. Ironically, Sal discovered that one step to managing his anxiety was to accept this mood: "I'm feeling anxious now that I'm here. Well, that is to be expected. I'll stay in this situation and notice what happens to my anxiety as I face it. I'll try to understand my reactions, rather than push them away." An accepting, non-judgmental attitude kept Sal's focus on his thoughts and moods, as well as on his goal to learn to manage anxiety in new and better ways. As these examples show, there are several pathways to acceptance:

1. We can simply observe our thoughts and feelings without judging them or trying to change them. This was Sal's approach to his anxiety. As one woman said, "I can see my thoughts and not be my thoughts."
2. We can put our thoughts and feelings in perspective by thinking about the larger picture. For example, Marissa's supervisor had a habit of telling the staff, "Let's be cheerful, ladies," every morning. This annoyed all the staff because it seemed so phony, and it was especially irritating to Marissa when she was depressed. Marissa found it helpful to look at the big picture. When she dwelled on her irritation, her mood really suffered. Marissa considered that this was just one minute out of each day, and thought about how her supervisor was willing to help her keep her job. This big picture thinking helped Marissa accept the irritating comment as a small price to pay for a supervisor who was generally supportive and good to her.
3. Sometimes it is easier to accept internal reactions or external circumstances when we connect our acceptance of thoughts and feelings to values that are important to us. Rodney did this when he put his love and caring for his father above his distress that his father no longer recognized him. Even though Rodney still experienced some distress while sitting with his father, he did not let this stop him from spending time with him. Rodney acknowledged his grief and sadness over his father's declining health, and still spent loving and caring time with him. Grief, love, and caring were each part of Rodney's experience. Over time, the value of these hours spent with his father became more meaningful, as Rodney was able to accept this time as a final phase in his relationship with his father.

## Acceptance worksheet

Identify one external situation (e.g., family, work, health, relationship) in which you think developing greater acceptance might be helpful. Consider situations that can't be easily changed or solved. Alternatively, write down some internal experiences (thoughts or moods) that recur often and negatively affect your mood.

**Situation:**

**Thoughts:**

**Moods:**

Try out one or more of the following paths to acceptance. It is not necessary to try each path for each situation, thought, or mood. Over time, as you practice acceptance, you might want to try each of these approaches at least once to see if they are helpful.

1. Observe your thoughts and moods (about the situation you have written down above) without judging, criticizing, or trying to change them. Just watch them as they occur. Be curious rather than critical. Try to make these observations for a few minutes each day for a week. This is much more difficult than it may appear. It is OK to notice if you become frustrated, distracted, bored, or judgmental. When you notice these things, just gently turn your attention back to the original thoughts and moods that you are observing.
2. Think about the bigger picture. What are the benefits of accepting this rather than being distressed? Are you focusing on only the negative parts of this experience and not recognizing other dimensions? Are there aspects to the situation that counterbalance the negative parts? If you can accept the parts that distress you, will you be able to enjoy or appreciate the rest of your experience more easily?
3. Sometimes paying too much attention to our distress prevents us from reaching our goals or living according to values that are important to us.
  - a. In this situation, is there some value or goal that is more important and meaningful to you than your distress? If so, write that value or goal here:
  - b. Think about how important that value or goal is for you.
  - c. How can you use *Mind Over Mood* skills to help you manage your distressing situation, thought, or mood, so you can approach or reach your values or goals?
  - d. Can you move in the direction of your values and goals while accepting the distress that you are experiencing?

Whether you followed the first, second, or third path to acceptance, write down what you have learned from this exercise: